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winona's twice-weekly newspaper since 1971

# winona post

wednesday, may 29, 2019

volume 48, no. 43

winonapost.com

inserts: full circulation: ■ Hy-Vee zoned circulation: ■ Blain's Farm & Fleet (2) ■ Minnwest

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## County to rent offices from Winona Health

by CHRIS ROGERS

Winona County officials plan to move the county's public health offices to Winona Health's campus as they prepare to downsize the county's own office buildings. Late last month, the Winona County Board approved a deal to rent the new space from Winona Health. The county's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program — which provides nutrition and health assistance and information to poor mothers and their children — is expected to move out of its current home, Winona County Office Building (COB), and move into Winona Health's Parkview Office Building by next Monday, when remodeling of the COB will begin. More public health offices will follow later this summer, as the county's building consolidation project gets into full swing.

In an effort to save on building maintenance costs, the Winona County Board sold one of its main offices, the Winona County Government Center at 177 Main Street in Winona, last fall. The county has been temporarily leasing the government center while it prepares to move all of its staff out of that building and into the county's other major downtown office, the COB.

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## Region faces need for EMTs



Photo by Chris Rogers

■ Winona Area Ambulance Service Paramedic Wendy Williamson checked a LUCAS machine, which automatically performs chest compressions for CPR. Both Winona's professional ambulance service and volunteer services in smaller towns are struggling to find enough staff.

by CHRIS ROGERS

When something terrible happens, Americans take for granted that life-saving help is just moments away. But providing that help takes trained people standing by at the ready, and in some local communities, those people are stretched thin. Lewistonites gathered two weeks ago to celebrate Sandy Nisbit's retirement after 38 years of volunteering with the Lewiston Ambulance Service. "When you look at dedication, look at Sandy," Roger Nietzke said. Co-workers praised her commitment and her ability to calm patients and colleagues alike. But in

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## Central school project clears hurdle

by CHRIS ROGERS

Winona developers Dan Nisbit and Shawn Beier's plans for the former Central Elementary School got a fairly warm reception at city hall earlier this month. Nisbit and Beier want to convert the former school into a mix of residential units and commercial space. The Planning Commission voted unanimously in support of the first approval. Nisbit and Beier will need: changing the city's comprehensive plan designation for the site. Some neighbors welcomed the project, as well, praising Nisbit and Beier's plans to preserve the historic school building.

Draft plans shared with the city show the former school building being converted into 18 residential units, though Beier said it might actually host fewer units, depending on the demand for commercial space. The two partners

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## From student to CEO



Photo by Nathaniel Nelson by NATHANIEL NELSON

■ David Moonen, CEO of Merrimack Canoe Company, dusts off some wood shavings from a completed canoe. Moonen, who graduated college earlier this month, has been leading the company for the last six months. Earlier this month, David Moonen graduated from Winona State University (WSU) along with hundreds of other students. He, like his classmates, walked the stage, grabbed his diploma and shook hands with WSU President Scott Olson — the last few steps before entering the working world. However, with Moonen, there is one catch.

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## Miss Winona teaches W-K to 'ACT'



Photo by Nathaniel Nelson

■ Miss Winona Sage Hovet reads a story book about being who you are to Lisa Kulzer's kindergarten class. Hovet taught nine classes over two days at Washington-Kosciusko Elementary School as part of the public impact portion of her Miss Winona role.

by NATHANIEL NELSON

On the second level of Washington-Kosciusko Elementary School, down a hallway in the music room, a group of excited kindergartners sit in a circle around the sides of the room. Their normal music class isn't happening today, though. Instead, they have a special guest — Sage Hovet, Miss Winona 2018, is here to teach the students about acceptance and compassion.

Hovet was crowned as Miss Winona last November, and as part of her time in the role, one of her goals is to create a social impact within her community.

"Every local title holder in the Miss Minnesota system has some social impact or mission throughout the year they want to promote," Hovet explained. "Mine is about how to treat others with kindness."

Her program, nicknamed ACT — which stands for acceptance, compassion, and tolerance — was based upon experiences she had volunteering both in high

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## CEO

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He's already a CEO.

Moonen was promoted to the CEO of Merrimack Canoe Company in January this year, while he was still finishing off his senior year in college studying recreation and tourism. The journey to running a canoe company was filled with twists and turns, he explained, and it all began when he got to college.

"It started stressful and ended stressful but for totally different reasons," Moonen explained.

Initially, Moonen went searching for a school where he could study geology and get out into the fields studying the land, which is how he ended up at WSU — and, of course, the bluffs that surround it. However, that was only the start.

"I went in for geology, but I didn't really like it. It seemed like it was leading toward working for some big oil company, and that wasn't interesting to me," he explained.

Instead, he was drawn over to the recreation and tourism department, since that had many of the aspects that he loves about the outdoors but is more focused on the enjoyment of it. He got to talking with Roger Riley, who would become his advisor for the rest of his college career.

"As a student he was really good when it either interested him intellectually or fulfilled his business goals," Riley said. "When something turns him on, he just grabs it, and he's like a pitbull going after it. He wants to know as much as he possibly can. He's certainly not afraid of hard work."

Riley ended up helping Moonen switch over, first "pulling credits out of nowhere," Moonen explained, and then putting him into four separate core courses in the program the next semester. By the end of his sophomore year, Moonen was already neck deep in the recreation and tourism curriculum.

"The degree I ended up getting couldn't have been more spot on for what I ended up needing," Moonen explained. "It's kind of a jack-of-all-trades degree, where I was introduced to everything in recreational business."

Even before getting to college, however, Moonen already had a taste for canoeing and the outdoors.

"Initially, I grew up around them and with them. My aunt did a lot of it, and my mom did it," Moonen explained. "It was also a great way to skip school, so I did it in college."

Throughout his time in school, Moonen took many trips out onto the backwaters, and on one of those trips, he was introduced to Sandborne Canoe Company by a friend and pressured to go apply. When he was checking the

place out, however, it was Merrimack and its canoes that caught his eye.

"I decided to pester them, so I stopped in every week or month or so until I was hired to cut fabrics," Moonen said.

Merrimack, one of several local canoe companies specializing in handmade canoes made out of wood and composite materials, has been around since 1953. The owners of Sandborne had recently bought Merrimack with the intention of bringing it under the Sandborne wing, Moonen explained, but after a while, they chose to focus on Sandborne's paddles full-time and let Merrimack be its own entity.

Moonen was still working as a part-timer at the company when the owners approached him about coming on as a full-time employee.

"Coming up on my senior year, they offered to give me a full-time spot," Moonen said. "I wasn't too interested, and I didn't want to work full-time at a small business, so I took a shot in the dark and said I would stick around if I could run it, and they went for it."

In January, Moonen started his job as CEO at the company, building canoes by day and filling out paperwork by night. For the next six months, he would have to balance his new managing duties at Sandborne, his role at Merrimack, his final classes at WSU and — to top it off — his role as a second lieutenant in the National Guard of Wisconsin.

"I'm not sure he sleeps," Riley said. "I actually do not know how he pulls it all off." For a 22 year old, balancing out all those responsibilities could be a little bit crazy, he explained.

"For me, it worked out relatively nicely, but [the semester] was still quite miserable," Moonen said. "In a regular day I would go to class for an hour or two and go to work every hour in between. It got pretty hectic, but the people here at work were pretty nice and made it doable."

A lot of his work involves learning as he goes, he explained, and utilizing different people's skills whenever he can. In total, he works with six or seven different artisans through the construction process while doing as much work as he can himself. He explained that his next step will be to focus on marketing, and bringing the Merrimack brand to a larger audience, but for now, he's continuing to work on canoes and paddles, still cutting fabric from time to time.

"His biggest strength is he knows how to access resources that can help him where he cannot," Riley said. "We try to get students ready to hit the ground running. He's not just running, he's sprinting. I'm just amazed at his tenacity. He's got a goal out there, and man, he's going for it."

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## EMTs

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some ways, Nisbit is not unique. A Baby Boomer who volunteered to serve her community for decades before reaching retirement — many rural ambulance services are full of people like Nisbit.

### EMTs in short supply

"It's a challenge. It's a real sad challenge," Scenic Valley Emergency Medical Service (EMS) Director Ron Olson said. Scenic Valley EMS volunteers serve Cochrane and Buffalo City, but for the last few years, its leaders have been talking about the possibility of shutting down because they cannot get enough volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs). People near or past retirement age make up a significant portion of the force. As soon as the service finds a few young recruits, those elders understandably step down, Olson said. "They're just hanging on because we're hurting so bad," he explained. "So it's hard to gain numbers because the older people are going to retire." Shutting down Scenic Valley EMS could leave rural portions of Buffalo County 20 minutes away from help, according to ambulance organizers.

"I would say we're pretty lucky right now," Lewiston Ambulance Director Matt Essig said. "We have a crew of 28 people, which I would say is unheard of, but in the next five to 10 years, as this older generation retires, it's going to turn into a problem."

Most rural ambulance agencies are staffed by volunteers who answer pagers in the middle of the night only to take their children to school and go to work at their full-time jobs in the morning. "It can be quite the investment of time," Galesville Ettrick First Responders Director Cara Shanley said.

"Nationwide, there's been a shortage of EMTs and paramedics, even for the paid people," Winona Area Ambulance Service Director of Operations Andy Teska said. The Winona agency offers its paramedics and EMTs full-time, paying jobs, but still struggles to recruit enough. Teska said that when he started with the service around 2012, all 12 of the agency's full-time staff were paramedics. Paramedics receive a significantly higher level of training and can provide more advanced care than EMTs. These days, Teska said, the staff is half paramedics and half EMTs because recruiting fully trained paramedics has gotten so difficult. Each of Winona's two on-duty ambulances is required to have at least one paramedic. "We're really stretched thin to provide 24/7, 365-days-a-year coverage," he stated.

The challenges rural ambulance services are facing have a ripple effect on Winona, Teska said. "If [rural ambulance services] can't staff, what happens is someone has to pick that up. It could be us. It could be their neighbors. And that puts more strain on everyone," he explained. "EMS is really a community. If we're not working together to find solutions, it hurts everyone in the community," he added.

### Why does the shortage exist?

For many small towns, the loss of in-town jobs is partly to blame. Daytime shifts are the hardest to fill, Rushford Community Ambulance Service Director Lynn Humble said. Everyone is working, not everyone can leave work for an ambulance run, and in many rural communities, going to work means driving 30 minutes away. "When Herff Jones was running, there were multiple people who worked there who could come," Essig said, referring to the defunct photography company that was a major employer in Lewiston for years.



Photo by Chris Rogers

■ Lewiston Ambulance celebrated longtime volunteer Sandy Nisbit's (at right) retirement after 38 years in emergency medical services. In some communities, many volunteer EMTs are reaching retirement age and local ambulance services have a hard time recruiting enough new ones.

"Because of the way Galesville and Ettrick are, there's not a lot for employment here," Shanley echoed. "Most of our responders work in La Crosse or Winona or Eau Claire, so we don't have too many people here during the day."

Sometimes, the few people who can respond during the day take the lion's share of daytime shifts. Essig said school district employees who volunteer with the ambulance service are a huge help for Lewiston. In Galesville, one pastor who volunteers as an EMT often goes on daytime calls alone. In Rushford, it's Paul Corcoran, the assistant fire chief who also answers ambulance calls every day, 365 days a year, Humble said. "He's amazing," she stated.

Nisbit and Shanley cited the increased time commitment and cost of training and recertification as an added burden on volunteers.

Olson said, "I think the younger generation — I hate to say this — but I don't think they're as committed to volunteering as some of the older people are."

Asked why paramedics are in short supply, Teska answered, "When I started here, being a paramedic — that's what you wanted to do for a career ... We've gone from being a career to being a middle step." Young people often use experience as an EMT or paramedic to move up into higher-paying health care careers. "I feel great that we were part of that story, but it can feel like a revolving door," he said.

Why isn't being a paramedic the career it once was? "I think that can be somewhat attributed — not 100 percent — but somewhat attributed to the pay," Teska stated. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Services, EMTs and paramedics earn a median wage of \$34,320 a year or \$16.50 an hour. Compare that to the median \$46,240 annual pay licensed practical nurses earn. City-run or hospital-run ambulance services are often able to pay more than independent ambulance services like Winona's, Teska said, explaining that taxes or hospital revenue can help augment those services' funding. "We try to do what we can to provide wages that are appropriate," he stated, while acknowledging that some of his staff work second jobs.

The Winona Area Ambulance Service's funding comes from ambulance fees. Asked if the service could simply raise fees to increase wages, Teska replied that while the agency does adjust its fees over time, it is not that easy. "There's a good chunk of the community and most communities that are on Medicaid or Medicare, and that's only going to pay so much," he explained. "We could raise the fees, but there's

still only going to be so much money coming from Medicare and Medicaid."

### What works?

Some young people are stepping up to fill the need for EMS staff. Marie Kasparova volunteered for Lewiston Ambulance for three years while also working part-time and taking 18 credits a semester at Winona State University before graduating with a biology and psychology double-major and a biochemistry minor this month. She wants to become an anesthesiologist assistant. Kasparova lives in Winona, but returns to Lewiston — where she attended high school as a foreign exchange student — and stays with her old host family on nights when she's on-call.

"It kind of grows on you. I don't know," Kasparova said when asked why she volunteers. "I don't know how to explain it. It's like family. You get to know the people and enjoy what you do." She continued, "It's also partly the reward, helping the community." Kasparova, who happened to be wearing a pink stork pin for delivering her first baby as an EMT, added, "It's always a rush when the pager goes off. It can be an accident or delivering a baby."

Grace Chamberlin also serves with Lewiston Ambulance and volunteered nearly every weekend while attending college. Asked how she fit the volunteer shifts into her life, she responded, "Honestly, I don't know ... Basically, any second I could, I wanted to be here." Chamberlin, who is applying to physician assistant schools, added that as an EMT, she enjoyed the challenge of figuring out what's wrong with patients. "You got to diagnose in the field, which you don't get to do much in a hospital unless you're a provider," she explained.

Chamberlin credited Lewiston's unusually large pool of EMTs to Essig's effort to keep volunteers on board. "He's such a good director," Nisbit echoed. Lewiston has made other changes to adapt to the shortage. The city made its ambulance director a full-time paid position instead of a volunteer gig. That way, Essig explained, there is always at least one person who can take daytime calls — himself. The city also converted the ambulance service office at city hall to double as sleeping quarters. A number of new volunteers come from out of town and stay there while on duty, Essig explained.

Anyone who graduates from a paramedic program gets snatched up right away by one agency or another, Teska stated. "We don't have paramedics coming off the street, saying, 'Hey, I want to work for you.' We have to home grow them," he explained. The Winona

Area Ambulance Services has found some success in reaching would-be EMTs early, while they are still in high school, through programs such as the Winona Area Chamber of Commerce's REACH job immersion. One recent hire visited the ambulance service as a high school student, got his EMT certificate after graduation, started work, and is now studying to become a paramedic. "That's been our tool: People come in, find out they really love it, and move on from there," Teska explained.

### Answering the call

Serving in EMS is challenging, local staff said. Some of the calls are grisly. In small communities, Olson said, "A lot of times, you're going to know the person, which can add to the challenges."

However, it is also tremendously fulfilling, local responders said. "To be able to save someone, there is no greater reward," Shanley said. "You can't beat the feeling that you feel at the end of the day," Teska stated. "I know that every encounter I have, I'm somehow making a difference in someone's life," he added.

Winona paramedic Wendy Williamson described helping an elderly woman who had fallen and was so grateful for Williamson's help. "People just appreciated it so much," Nisbit said of her service. "You knew them before, but the minute you go on a call, you're their best friend," she said.

Every day at work is different, and there is no busy work, Williamson said.

"If there's interest, we're certainly willing to show people what we do. Give us a call," Teska stated.

People who are thinking of becoming EMTs and taking the class — if they have a current CPR card, we like them to ride along on calls and see what they're like," Humble stated. "It may be just a transport where a person isn't felling well, or it may be something bad — a car accident or a nasty break or something. If they're able to deal with that, then we encourage them to continue."

The Winona and Lewiston ambulance services both offer EMT classes. Winona's next training session starts in August, runs for four hours a night on two nights a week, and ends in December. One semester of night classes can prepare you for a job right out of the gate, Winona paramedic Heather Grinsteiner noted.

Many local ambulance services will cover the cost of training for volunteers who commit to service. At no cost, volunteers can learn something they will use the rest of their lives, Olson said.

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High 78°  
Low 55°

### FRIDAY

Scattered  
Thunderstorms  
High 82°  
Low 62°

### SATURDAY

Scattered  
Thunderstorms  
High 72°  
Low 55°

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